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## **Reflections on new policies for Early Childhood Education and Care in Scotland**

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### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to set in context the new policy proposals recently put forward by the Scottish Executive for the future of early childhood education and care in Scotland (SE, 2003) and to identify the challenges facing such proposals. Over the past six years this sector of education has been the focus of concerted and sustained policy initiatives (Wilkinson, 2003). Since 1997 early childhood education and care in the UK has received unprecedented attention from central government. In Scotland, major policy initiatives have been launched that are backed with considerable resources from the Scottish Executive and the Treasury. These major policies are:

- the Childcare Strategy
- the 3 – 5 Curriculum Framework
- Sure Start Scotland
- the establishment of the National Care Commission

In addition, there are important policy initiatives in health services at the local level, such as the Starting Well demonstration project in Glasgow.

Fundamentally, these policies are directed at changing the relationship between the state and the family in the education and care of children, principally (though not exclusively) before children start primary school at the age of 4 or 5 (Wilkinson, 2003). The essential change to the relationship has been initiated by the enhanced role for the state in children's early years, largely in response to sustained demands from both parents and professionals for more and better services. From 1945 to 1997, successive central governments were content to be the lesser partner in supporting families with young children under the age of 5. The responsibility for rearing children was regarded as that of the family with targeted support from the state where appropriate. In terms of education and care, central government's role was essentially to help resource selective provision through two mechanisms. First, in the form of supporting services such as nursery schools, nursery classes, day nurseries and family centres via allocations to Education Departments and Social Work Departments in the majority of local authorities, and secondly, in the provision of training for education and care professionals – teachers and nursery nurses – either in the HEI sector in the case of the former, or, in the case of the latter, the FE sector.

Prior to 1997 the provision of early childhood education and care services by the state for families with children under five was widely regarded throughout the UK as being woefully inadequate (Moss & Penn, 1996; Wilkinson, 2003). First, it was inadequate to meet the metamorphosis of the family during the 1980s and 1990s (Coote et al., 1990). Places in nursery schools and classes were only available on a highly selective basis for 3-5 year olds on a part-time basis during the period 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and only during school terms. Day nurseries and family centres, whilst often open all day and all year, only admitted children deemed to be vulnerable. The majority of children under the age of five, whose parents saw the value of learning experiences outside the home, attended sessional groups in the voluntary sector such as playgroups or accessed services in the private sector for those parents who could afford the fees. The facilities for childcare, whether in the public, private or voluntary sector, were not in harmony with the emerging pluralism in family arrangements, particularly if the parents were employed or the family was headed by a lone parent. In addition, the increasing expectations and empowerment of women and the changing nature of work resulted in powerful pressures for radical action by central government. Many parents, particularly mothers, felt the need to become economically active but were restricted by the

lack of high quality, affordable, easily accessible childcare. Secondly, the system was hidebound (and still is) by the existence of two professional groups working in early years establishments – nursery nurses and nursery teachers. These groups have very different conditions of service, financial remuneration and career opportunities, yet are working closely together in promoting children’s learning and well-being. Such is the feeling of discontent amongst nursery nurses that industrial action was taken in the summer of 2003.

Pressure for change in central government’s role in early childhood education and care came from a number of sources – parents, international policy groups (such as the European Childcare Network) and academics such as Moss, Penn, Sylva and others. On election of a Labour government in 1997, a priority for the new government, underpinned with its *Third Way* ideology (Giddens, 1998), was to respond to these pressures in a robust manner. In Scotland, the Scottish Office and, since 1999, the Scottish Executive of the Scottish Parliament, have issued a raft of new policies aimed at expanding the availability of services, the quality of services and their affordability to all families with children aged 3-5 years who wished such services, and on a selective basis, services for families with children under 3 years of age. The *Childcare Strategy for Scotland* (Scottish Office, 1998) is an ambitious programme of action. Coupled with the new Curriculum Framework for Children 3-5 (SOEID, 1999), the introduction of Sure Start Scotland (Scottish Executive, 1999), the report *Working Towards a Healthier Scotland* (Department of Health, 1998) and the establishment of the Care Commission, with regulatory powers outlined in the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act of 2001, it represents a very significant attempt by New Labour and subsequently the Scottish Executive to take a major role in the education and care of children from birth to school age and beyond. These major policy milestones form the main attempts by the Executive for the state to take a more dominant role in the well-being of young children in Scotland. As a whole, they represent a major re-orientation of the distribution of responsibility between the state and the family in the process of socialising and educating children from birth to age 5 and beyond. The basis for such a re-distribution of responsibility has recently been outlined by Wilkinson (2003). Drawing on a range of literature (Ball, 1994; Sylva & Wiltshire, 1994; Anning & Edwards, 1999 and Giddens, 1998) Wilkinson argues the case for the ‘managed state’ to take concerted action to support families in the challenging task of child-rearing in an era of late-modernism:-

*This report presents a challenge to the nation – to parents, educators, employers, parliament – indeed to our society as a whole. It demonstrates the importance of early learning as a preparation for effective education to promote social welfare and social order, and to develop a world class workforce.* (Ball, 1994, p6)

The challenge identified by Ball is by no means unique to the UK. Most English-speaking nations are at a watershed in re-defining the role of the state in relation to families with young children. As Belsky observed:

*It is indisputable that the child-rearing landscape has changed greatly in the English-speaking world over the past several decades. This is particularly so in the United States, but true in the United Kingdom as well.* (Belsky, 2001, p.845)

The *Childcare Strategy for Scotland* identified three critical steps to improving and expanding education and care services for families with a child under the age of five. These were:

- raising the quality of care
- making childcare more accessible by increasing places and improving information
- making childcare more affordable

The strategy was based on five principles – quality, affordability, diversity, accessibility and partnership, which are derived from *Third Way* ideology.

The first of the steps, that is, raising the quality of care, is being addressed through two mechanisms: regulation and quality assurance. In terms of regulation, a new statutory body has been established:

*In its White Paper **Targeting Excellence** the Government proposed the setting up of a new regulatory body for all establishments providing care in Scotland, to be called the **Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care**. It was intended that this new Commission would have responsibility for registration, inspection and associated activities in a wide range of care settings. It was not surprising to learn therefore that the Consultation Paper on regulation subsequently proposed to allocate the responsibility for the regulation of childcare to this new Commission. Undoubtedly, this proposal was a milestone in the development of early childhood services in Scotland. The Paper outlined the substantive issues for consultation: what to regulate; how to regulate; and the standards to be achieved.*

(Wilkinson, 2003, p.29)

The Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2001. Shortly afterwards, the national care standards for childcare services for children and young people up to the age of 16 were published by the Commission (Scottish Executive, 2002a). All early years establishments are now expected to implement these standards.

In addition to enhanced regulation, the Scottish Executive has addressed the issue of quality assurance. The *Child at the Centre* (Scottish Executive, 2000) is a self-evaluation mechanism recommended for all early years establishments in Scotland by the Scottish Executive. In addition, there is a formal inspection process for those settings either run directly by local authorities (the public sector) or those settings in either the independent sector or the voluntary sector which have been granted partnership status with an appropriate local authority, giving them access to state funding. Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HMIE) visit all establishments in receipt of state funding to ensure that the Curriculum Framework 3-5 is being implemented successfully.

In addition to HMIE inspections and the implementation of self-evaluation procedures to enhance quality in early years provision, the Childcare Strategy document encouraged both the independent and voluntary sectors to put in place systematic arrangements for quality assurance. Both the Scottish Independent Nurseries Association (SINA) and the Scottish Pre-School Play Association (SPPA) now have quality assurance mechanisms in place, though such procedures are not yet being applied to all private and voluntary sector settings.

The second step in the *Childcare Strategy for Scotland*, that is, expanding provision, is being addressed through the 'mixed-economy' model of service provision, whereby resources to support provision in each of the three sectors – public, private and voluntary – are provided by the state. The Executive made a commitment to providing a quality education place for every 3- and 4-year old by 2002, should the parents wish it:

*It was proposed that expansion of places be achieved through the mixed-economy model of provision, i.e. that a means be found to facilitate access to those families who wish it to flexible provision in the independent and voluntary sectors, as well as to increase the number of places in the public sector. A partnership arrangement – called local childcare partnerships – was therefore initiated, involving all three types of provider.*

(Wilkinson, 2003, p.36)

In addition, new funds were allocated from the Lottery revenues to expand out-of-school care and the provision for under-threes.

The third step in the Strategy is to make childcare more affordable for parents. This is being done through the childcare tax credit as part of the Working Families Tax Credit system:

*In the Childcare Strategy, the Government gave the undertaking to provide free part-time places (i.e. 5 half days per week) for every 4-year old in Scotland subject to parental wishes, and for every 3-year old from 2002. To ensure parity with the public sector, this meant that public funds had to be channelled to families who wished to access the provision in the independent and voluntary sectors. The mechanism introduced to achieve this was the childcare tax credit as part of the Working Families Tax Credit targeted at low and middle income families.*

(Wilkinson, 2003, p.37)

In the health domain, major initiatives have also been launched and endorsed by the Scottish Executive. For example, *Working Towards a Healthier Scotland* (Department of Health, 1998), whilst concerned with the health of the population as a whole, placed particular emphasis on the health of children. Child health was identified as a priority health topic which required action by central government towards improving child and maternal health through a range of measures, the principal one of which for young children was Starting Well, a health demonstration project in Glasgow. Promoting a healthy lifestyle, as well as maintaining good health in children, are major challenges for the Health Boards. The Health Improvement Fund was established in 2000 *with the aim of not just treating ill health but also preventing it and supporting healthier lifestyles, life chances and life circumstances*. A priority in the distribution of the fund is in child health by supporting such activities as breakfast clubs, healthy eating and oral hygiene. It is increasingly recognised that such challenges are closely linked with early childhood education. Unfortunately, the delivery of health and medical services is not yet integral to the organisation of early childhood education and care in Scotland. The need for the integration of such services was recognised in the report *For Scotland's Children – better integrated children's services* (Scottish Executive, 2001) as the lack of integration of services – education, care, health – impinge on families in ways such as:

- *the need to repeat the same information to each agency*
- *the absence of mutual awareness among service providers*
- *services pulling in different directions*

(Scottish Executive, 2001, p.22)

The impact of these policies embedded in the Childcare Strategy is now beginning to emerge. In terms of expanding the system:

*Statistics on the expansion of the early childhood education system in Scotland show that at the beginning of 2002, 96% of all 4-year olds and 85% of all 3-year olds were accessing early childhood care and education services, such services being available in an estimated 4,117 locations the length and breadth of Scotland..... by any standard they represent a quantum leap forward from 1996/7, which was the last year in office of the then Conservative Government.*

(Wilkinson, 2003, p.48)

In addition, in 2000/2001 the Sure Start programme in Scotland was supporting over 15,000 vulnerable children under the age of 3 (Cunningham-Burley *et al*, 2002).

In terms of improving the quality of provision information available from HMIE inspections (HMIE, 2002), reports from local authorities and individual research studies (for example, see Sylva *et al.*, 1999) are now indicating that *a large proportion of children are experiencing a high quality pre-school education in Scotland though there is still scope for considerable improvement in the private and voluntary sectors*. (Wilkinson, 2003, p.53)

## 2. Improvement through Regulation and Integration

The establishment of the Care Commission by the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act, 2001 represents a sea-change in the regulatory framework for childhood education and care:

*In its drive to enhance quality in early childhood services in Scotland, the Government believed that early years education and childcare need to be subject to regulation backed by statute. The Consultation Paper **Regulation of Early Education and Childcare**)..... and the Government's White Paper **Aiming for Excellence** initiated the establishment of a new and important regulatory body, the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care. The aim of the Commission is to ensure an improvement in the quality and services in Scotland, respecting the rights of people who use those services to dignity, choice and safety.*

(Wilkinson, 2003, p.58)

The purpose of the Commission is to ensure the attainments of unified national standards in all types of care settings – not just those for children – with an emphasis on protection, welfare and safety. That there is a need for greater attention to the protection of children is clearly demonstrated in the large increase in the number of children being referred each year to social work departments for concerns about abuse. Over 7000 children were referred in 2001 (Scottish Executive, 2002b) for suspected abuse. In response to the Review Report *It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright* (SE, 2002c) the Executive announced a five-point plan requiring action by all the relevant agencies. The critical issue to be addressed however, is whether this emphasis on protection feeds a culture of fear that restricts children's need for challenge, risk and exploration. There is an acute tension in the balance therefore between the pressure on the state to protect children from both being in danger and being dangerous with the need to provide enriching and challenging opportunities for learning for all young children. A number of authors (James et al, 1998; Wilkinson, 2003) have recently taken the view that this balance has shifted in the direction of protection with potential long-term negative consequences for society. Unfortunately, this 'culture of fear' is constantly reinforced by a tiny number of publicised crimes against children.

There have been a number of high profile cases of child murders and abuse of children in recent years – the murder of James Bulger in 1993 and the murder of Holly and Jessica in Soham in 2001 – to name but two of the most horrific incidents. Such incidents are understandably sensationalised by the media, which together with stories of abduction and the prominence given to the existence of paedophiles, make life very difficult for parents bringing up young children in contemporary Scotland. The uncertainty and confusion felt by many parents causes them to be anxious and over-protective. Such a 'culture of fear' is now common-place in society and one must ask whether such a culture works in children's best long-term interests.

But if parents are under pressure, so too are professionals:

*An interesting and disturbing cultural shift is at work in the relationship between young children and their teachers. It is a shift played out in an intimate space – a space traditionally not much spoken about in the study of education: that between the bodies of the teacher and the child. 'Teachers touching children' has become the site of a new social taboo, one about which there is much confusion and anxiety amongst teachers, as well as parents and children.*

(Jones, 2001, p.9)

If many professionals are in a state of near panic about touching children and many parents are unduly protective in response to perceived threats, real or imaginary, what chance is there that children can experience the challenges of childhood from a base of safety and security?

In response to the same pressures as those now affecting parents and professionals, the state is reinforcing the regulatory frameworks for early childhood education and care.

*It would be catastrophic for the future of Scotland if the well-intentioned regulatory frameworks for the education and care of young children introduced since 1997 inadvertently provided a platform for a new paternalism where the authoritarian forces of restriction inadvertently generated isolation, frustration and fear.*

(Wilkinson, 2003, p.67)

The well-intentioned nature of the Executive's policies is not in question. But how can the tightening grip of the culture of fear be balanced with a realisation that children need a degree of freedom and opportunity for self-determination so that socially responsible attitudes and behaviour are to be fostered in future generations?

### 3. The Integrated Early Years Strategy

The most recent policy initiative to emerge from the Scottish Executive is the proposed *Integrated Strategy for the Early Years*. The policy is targeted at greater integration amongst the range of professionals involved with families with young children in order to strengthen the enhanced responsibilities of the state on the basis that the 'whole is greater than the sum of the parts'. Integration of services for families with young children has been seen as highly desirable for a considerable period of time but has proved elusive to implement. The need for collaborative working between different professional groups in the interests of children was well articulated in the report *For Scotland's Children* (Scottish Executive, 2001).

In 2003 the Executive issued a Consultation paper on the proposed *Integrated Strategy for the Early Years*.

*This paper focuses on the services provided to young children from pre-birth to 5 and their families. It sets out a framework which draws together existing policies from across the Executive in this area – whether that is promoting childcare, health visitor support, pre-school education or broader support for parenting skills. It seeks to promote greater coherence between these Executive policies to give better support to joined-up delivery on the ground.*

(Scottish Executive, 2003, p.2)

The policy as set out in the Consultation paper suggests an ambitious set of detailed universal outcomes and indicators in terms of children's health, education, care, parental employment and family well-being. For example, in the health domain, one of the specified indicators of success of the policy is to increase the proportion of women breastfeeding their babies. In the education domain, an indicator of success is *to increase the proportion of pupils in P3 achieving or exceeding Level A in reading, writing and mathematics*. The new Early Years Strategy is targeted at all those involved in planning and delivering early years services and represents an important step forward.

A critical issue, however, in relation to this policy is the procedure for implementing it. The Consultation Paper proposes five 'building blocks':

- alignment of Executive policies across Departments
- creation of a greater coherence in relevant Executive funding
- a set of clear outcomes from local partners
- support for joint planning, commissioning and single system service delivery
- a framework to monitor and evaluate impact

The extent to which these 'building blocks' might be effective in terms of the specified desirable outcomes depends on innovative arrangements for the funding and delivery of the

relevant services. It appears that the new thinking as exposed in the Consultation Paper is based on an inadequate realisation of the structural barriers to professional integration:

*We must now build on these important developments by thinking of them as the components of a single service directed towards young children and their families.*  
(Scottish Executive, 2003, p.12)

If the working practices of different professionals are to be re-modelled, a radical approach to service delivery must be invented. Merely encouraging different professionals to see themselves as 'components of a single service' will not be sufficient. It is notoriously difficult to generate systematic collaboration between different professionals (Wilkinson, 1995; Sammons et al., 2002). The solution is structural, not functional. One local authority in Scotland has recognised this structural issue by the establishment of a Children's Services Department, combining 'Education' and 'Social Work' with other local authority responsibilities. Evidence of multi-agency working can also be found in the evaluation of the Pilot New Community Schools in Scotland (Sammons, et al, 2003). However, a number of barriers to such working being effective were identified:

*A range of barriers to multi-agency working had to be overcome to deliver multi-agency services. These included practical issues of different working hours, holiday arrangements and accommodation issues and professional issues of confidentiality procedures and levels of formality.*  
(Sammons et al, 2003, p.4)

It is clear therefore that promoting integrated professional services is a complex and multi-levelled problem.

Another concern that is evident in the discourse of the Consultation Paper on the Integrated Strategy for the Early Years is the seeming pre-occupation with short-term goals. There is no question that goals such as nourishment, physical care, protection from danger, security and stability are vitally important for children's all-round well-being. But at the heart of promoting a more humane society in the educative process. It is not sufficient to provide opportunities to explore the world and have increasing independence. Although such matters are fundamental, they are not sufficient in themselves to penetrate existing professional practice with new ways of working. This paper contends that we need a new vision for all professionals that gives priority to children's learning through challenge, risk and responsibility.

There is also a danger in the new policy of regarding professional services (whether integrated or otherwise) of merely *delivering* benefits to children and families. Clearly the need for such benefits as improved health, better emotional adjustment, improved learning, stronger families is not in doubt. The challenge is to inculcate and foster in young children a mind-set that internalises such attributes so that children's routine day-to-day behaviour reflects a more sophisticated level of awareness of the need to be meaningfully engaged with the process of self-improvement. As such, the task facing educators of young children –whether they be teachers, nursery nurses, playleaders or parents – is daunting.



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